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ABSTRACT

Student characteristics related to out-of-class interactions with faculty were studied. Interviews with 26 undergraduate students focused on the following topics: students' college and life goals, interpersonal relationships, relationships with faculty, undergraduate activities, self-image, approach to education, and feelings about college. A grounded theory approach was used to discover several categories and properties associated with students' patterns of interaction with faculty. These categories were used to develop a theoretical model that predicts and explains students' frequency and type of interaction with faculty. From this model, a more general theory was developed that can be generalized to other college environments. This theory explains students' patterns of interaction with faculty in terms of three main variables: self-esteem, perception of the environment, and involvement in college life. It was found that the more involved students are in all aspects of the college, and the more positively they perceive themselves and the college environment, the more likely they are to seek informal, out-of-class interactions with professors. (Author/SW)

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A THEORETICAL MODEL OF STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION

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This exploratory study investigated student characteristics related to out-of-class interactions with faculty. A grounded theory approach was used to discover several categories and properties associated with students' patterns of interaction with faculty. These categories were used to develop a theoretical model that predicts and explains students' frequency and type of interaction with faculty. From this model, a more general theory was developed which can be generalized to other college environments. This theory explains students' patterns of interaction with faculty in terms of three core variables: (a) self-esteem; (b) perceptions of the environment; and (c) involvement in college life. The more information available on students' properties of these variables, the better their patterns of interaction can be predicted.

A THEORETICAL MODEL OF STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION

Rebecca Shaw

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Students who participate often in informal, out-of-class interactions with faculty derive a substantial number of benefits, such as improved academic achievement, higher aspirations, enhanced personal and social development, and greater college persistence (Astin, 1977; Centra & Rock, 1971). Such outcomes of higher education are important to students and to the institution alike, and have provided the focus for most studies of student-faculty interaction. Little is known, on the other hand, about the characteristics or the motives of students who seek informal, out-of-class discussions with faculty, even though the topics of discussion which occur during student-faculty interactions generally are known (Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood & Bavry, 1975). As important as is this phenomenon to higher education, no theory is available to explain variations in student interaction patterns with faculty.

High quality student-faculty interactions often are associated with certain types of environments, such as those of small, liberal arts colleges (Astin, 1977), but opportunity and motive for student-initiated, informal, out-of-class discussions with faculty exist in all college environments. Outcomes, such as those listed above, may accrue to students in any type environment; thus, characteristics of the environment alone fail to explain the total phenomenon. That certain faculty characteristics are more amenable to interactions with students likewise fails to account for the total phenomenon. A major force in the initiation of these contacts is the student, and it is the lack of knowledge of students' motives and actions which originated the need for this research.

The purpose of this study was to provide some basic, preliminary information about the personal, social, and educational characteristics of students which are related to their patterns of interaction with faculty, and to use the data collected to help explain why students seek informal contacts with faculty by incorporating the findings into a conceptual and theoretical model of student-faculty interaction.

Method

Because this study began with the goal of formulating theory, an exploratory qualitative methodology was employed. This approach, discovering grounded formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), is a sociological method of inquiry which has as its primary goal the generation of a data-based theory. The data are collected from the field and are treated to extensive qualitative analysis in search for the theory. The grounded theory is generated through a technique of constant comparative analysis of the data, wherein each new piece of evidence is compared to data previously gathered until conceptual categories emerge. These categories, or variables, are the concepts which relate the properties of the data to the topic of study. The properties may be conditions, causes, types, contexts, or dimensions of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978).

In addition to the regular conceptual categories that emerge from the analyses, "core categories" or variables may be discovered. These represent main themes that are present in other conceptual categories of the data, and form the base of the emerging theory. These core categories serve to integrate other categories in a manner which better conceptualizes the nature of the pertinent variables and the theory itself.

Data

In the spring of 1981, intensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 undergraduate students at a large southeastern university. Following the tenets of the grounded theory approch, the sampling method was judgmental and selective, aimed at choosing students with ample opportunity for (but not necessarily experience in) interactions with professors, and choosing students who differed as much as possible in their involvement in various aspects of the college environment.

Lasting from one to two hours, the interviews focused on the following topics: (a) students' college and life goals, (b) interpersonal relationships, (c) relationships with faculty, (d) undergraduate activities, (e) self-image, (f) approach to education, and (g) feelings about college. The belief that students' responses to college are due, in part, to their involvement, interest, and place in the environment influenced the selection of these topics in the interviews.

Data for the study were gathered in two stages. In the initial stage, ten students were interviewed and data from the interviews were analyzed, constantly yielding tentatively patterned variations in students' reasons for and type and frequency of interaction with faculty. The initial analysis led to the identification of several concepts or variables which appeared to be related to

students' patterns of interaction.

Following on these tentative formulations, the final 16 interviews were conducted, enlarging on various aspects of the interview topics. Comparative analysis of the data at this stage began to yield several conceptual categories with distinctive properties conditionally related to students' patterns of interaction with faculty. Specifically, seven categories emerged as pertinent to the explanation of frequency and type of interaction with faculty. These categories and their various properties were used to develop a model which described three general types of infrequent interactors and two types of frequent interactors. This typological model formed the base for the gounded theory. From the model, three core categories, or main themes, emerged which combined to form the basis for a generalized theory of student-faculty interactions.

Conceptual Categories

The conceptual categories and their properties are presented in Figure 1 and described below:

Motivation and College Goals. Data were categorized by the nature and quantity of students' reasons for being in college. Reasons ranged from students having few and unclear goals, such as "Attending college seemed the thing to do at the time. . ." to those having many and varied reasons for college, such as "I always wanted to be an architect. . ." or "I value the college experience itself. . ."

Patterns of Association and Communications. This category described students' comfort in meeting and socializing with others, and the quality of friends and acquaintances. Subjects' general patterns of interaction with others ranged from occassional, necessary contacts to aggressive, manipulation of circumstances to promote contacts.

Perceptions of the Environment. Students were found to hold either positive or negative perceptions of two spheres of the college environment -- the academic sphere and the social sphere. Their propensity to interact with others within either sphere was influened by their attraction to it when positive perceptions were held or their alienation from it when negative perceptions were held.

Self-Image. The properties of this category concerned students' impressions of their academic abilities and of their personality generally. Subjects with positive perceptions of their abilities or of their personality were more likely to interact with others than subjects with negative perceptions of either aspect of self.

College Activities. Variations in the amount and in the nature of activities constituted the properties for this category. Students with few activities generally were found to be low interactors and those with many activities were high interactors. The nature of involvement in activities showed considerable variation across types of students, patterned roughly from single-focus, special interest type involvement for low interactors to wide variety in types of involvement for high interactors.

Perceived Role of Faculty. This category is one which explains student-perceived factors which inhibit interaction with faculty. The category's property measures whether students felt faculty were too "important" or disinterested to have informal discussions with students.

Peer Pressure. This category also explained reluctance to interact with professors. The property distinguished whether students felt their peers might see interaction with faculty as an attempt to gain special favors.

Interaction with Faculty. In the typology, interaction with faculty possessed two properties -- frequency of contact and topic of discussion.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The Typology

As shown in Figure 1, the seven conceptual categories differentiated high and low interacting students when examined simultaneously. The typology was constructed by comparing different properties students held with their patterns of interaction with faculty. The distinctions between the following five groups, or "types," describes differences in the nature and frequency of students' interaction patterns.

Type I Students. These students lack clear goals or reasons for attending college. They tend to be loners, having few friends or acquaintances. Ill-at-ease around others, this type student perceives the social environment negatively. Having few educational or career goals, they perceive the academic sphere of college negatively as well. These students lack self-esteem, and believe that professors would not be interested in them. They also tend to believe that other students might perceive their interactions with faculty as attempts to gain favors. This type has the lowest frequency of interaction with professos. They contact faculty only when absolutely necessary, such as for arranging make-up exams. Conseuqently, virtually all their discussions are of course-related matters.

Type II Students. This group is in college for purely educational or career purposes, and is involved almost exclusively in the academic realm. These students have confidence in their academic abilities, but tend to be less sure of their social skills. They are enrolled for education, not for socializing. Consequently, their out-of-class activities tend to be minimal and functional, generally limited to membership in professional organizations or academic department clubs. The feeling that faculty might be more interested in research and in publishing than in them normally is held by these students. However, they do not let this belief totally inhibit their seeking contact. Albeit only when necessary, they will

interact with faculty for educational or career purposes.

Type III Students. This type of student is almost opposite of Type II. Type III students are in college to have fun, make friends, and to enjoy life. They have few or unclear career or educational goals and many are in school at their parents' behest. However, they have excellent social skills and feel very positively about their interpersonal relationships and overall personalities. These students are involved in relatively few organized college activities other than in fraternities/sororities and limited other social activities. Being uninvolved in the academic sphere of college, they have no real need for interaction with professors, and thus seek contact only when necessary. This type of student is especially vulnerable to peer pressure negatively associated with seeking relationships with faculty.

Type IV Students. These students, like those in Type II, have very strong educational and career goals. They view college as an essential resource for achieving their objectives. They are highly confident in both their academic and social skills. Although quite at ease with others, socializing is subservient to goal attainment. For this type, education, and to a lesser extent, people, are tools to that end. Thus their extracurricular involvement is functional. They belong to oranizations that provide job contacts, further them in their fields, or simply look good

on their resumes. Their contact with faculty also is functional, and occasionally manipulative. These students have frequent interactions, with discussions focusing on topics which will help in goal achievement, such as career information or course-related matters. They have little concern for what others might think of their frequent interaction, since the benefits of better grades, helpful job contacts, and flattering letters of recommendation far outweigh any negative peer pressure.

Type V Students. Students of this type, also frequent interactors, have strong career, personal, and social goals. They perceive the college environment positively, and are well-integrated into both the social and academic systems of college. They tend to be involved in numerous and varied activities, from which they derive many personal benefits. Their interactions with professors occur frequently, and may involve discussion of many different topics. These students seek contact for career information, course-related problems, personal concerns, as well as casual socializing. For this type student, professors often serve as mentors and friends.

The Theory

From the seven conceptual categories that formed the typology, three core categories, or main themes, emerged.

These core categories, encompassing the conceptual categories, are: (a) students' self-esteem, (b) perceptions of the environment; and (c) involvement in college life. The core categories serve as major components of a generalized theory of student-faculty interaction. Each of the core categories is defined by its particular properties, each of which possesses dimensions of magnitude and direction (see Figure 2). For example, the core category of students' self-esteem has two properties, each of which may be positive or negative and weak or strong.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Using these core categories and their relationships to students' patterns of interacting with faculty, the grounded theory, restated more generally, describes the fit between student and environment. The more positively students feel about themselves and the environment, and the greater their involvement in all segments of college life, the more likely they are to interact informally with their professors. This fit is illustrated by the properties and dimensions of the core categories that the students hold. Students' extent and breadth of involvement in the environment are related to their reason for being in college and their perceptions of the value and worth of college. The more important college is for students' goal achievement, the more positively students will perceive the environment. Students' feelings about specific segments of the environment are related to their goals and reasons for college. Thus students whose primary reasons for attending college are recreational tend to perceive the social sphere of the college more positively, while students whose goals essentially are educational tend to view the academic segments more favorable.

Students' reasons for college are related to their patterns of contact with faculty. Students' interactions are in some way functional; that is, they serve some educational, personal, social, or career-related purpose. Students' reasons for seeking out-of-class interactions are related to their individual goals, needs , and expectations

of college. Interactions will be perceived as necessary and worthwhile if they assist in meeting some goal. These goals are reflected by students' expectations of and involvement in the college environment. The more faculty can assist in this goal achievement, the more students will seek interactions with them.

Students perceive faculty as part of the college's total resources. In order for students to seek informal contact with faculty, they must want or need to partake in these resources In addition, students also must consider themselves entitled to a professor's time, interest, and attention. If students believe faculty are disinterested, they may be reluctant to seek informal contact unless absolutely necessary. Students' reasons for seeking out-of-class contact are in part dependent upon their reasons for attending college. Thus, students who are in college for specific vocational purposes will interact with their professors in some way which might further their career goals. Similarly, the type of interaction--the topic of discussion between students and faculty--is related to students' goals. The more reasons students have for attending college, the more variety in topics of discussion they hold with their professors.

In sum, the more involved students are in all aspects of the college, and the more positively they perceive themselves and the college environment, the more likely they are to seek informal, out-of-class interactions with professors. Thus the greater the fit or congruence between students and the overall college environment, the more frequently these out-of-class interactions will occur. The more varied the students' interests and goals, the more likely they will engage in many different types of informal conversations with professors.

Need for Further Research

Theory development is a continuous and ongoing affair. It is a process whose product is tentative and unproven. Thus the "outcome" of a grounded theory is a set of hypotheses, testable and defined. From this theory of student-faculty interaction, two related hypotheses were derived.

1. Students are more likely to interact with faculty if: (a) it serves some social, educational, personal, or career related purpose; (b) they feel entitled to the time and attention of their professors; and (c) they feel the college experience is instrumental in goal achievement.

2. The topics of students' discussions with faculty are related to students' needs, interests, and expectations

of the college experience.

Testing these hypotheses, quantitatively and with objective assessment devices, may be the next step in development of this theory.

Discussion

Out-of-class interactions with faculty clearly have many important consequences for students. Many college and faculty members, aware of the importance of these interactions, have attempted to improve opportunities for informal relationships between students and professors (Bolton & Kammeyer, 1967; Hutchins & Miller, 1979; Smith, 1976). Yet these interactions still occur infrequently, perhaps because so little has been known of why students interact, or even who these interacting students are. The theory described here provides a starting place for understanding some of the student characteristics associated with their patterns of interaction with faculty. Further testing of the theory, and subsequent discoveries, can be used to enhance and promote these informal relationships between student and professor.

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CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES	CATEGORIES' PROPERTIES	STUDENT TYPOLOGY				
		TYPE I	TYPE II	TYPE III	TYPE IV	TYPE V
Motivation and College Goals	Nature of Goals	Few or Unclear	Academic/ Career	Social/ Recreational	Academic/ Career	Many/ Varied
Patterns of Association and Communication	Acquaintances Friends Meeting People	Few Few Highly Uncomfortable	Some Some Somewhat Comfortable	Many Many Highly Comfortable	Many Some Highly Comfortable	Many Many Highly Comfortable
Perceptions of the Environment	Academic Social	Negative Negative	Positive Negative	Negative Positive	Positive Positive	Positive Positive
Self-Image	Abilities Personality	Negative Negative	Positive Negative	Negative Positive	Positive Positive	Positive Positive
College Activities	Amount Nature of Activity	Few Special Interest	Few Professional/ Academic	Few Social	Many Professional/ Honor/ Service	Many Varied
Perceived Role of Faculty	Perceptions Inhibiting Interactions	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Peer Pressure	Extent of Influence	High	Low	High	Low	Low
Interactions with Faculty	Frequency Topic of Discussion	Low, When Necessary Course-Related	Low, When Necessary Career or Course-related	Low, When Necessary Course-Related	High Career or Course-related	High Varied

Figure 1

Theoretical Model of Student Interactions with Faculty

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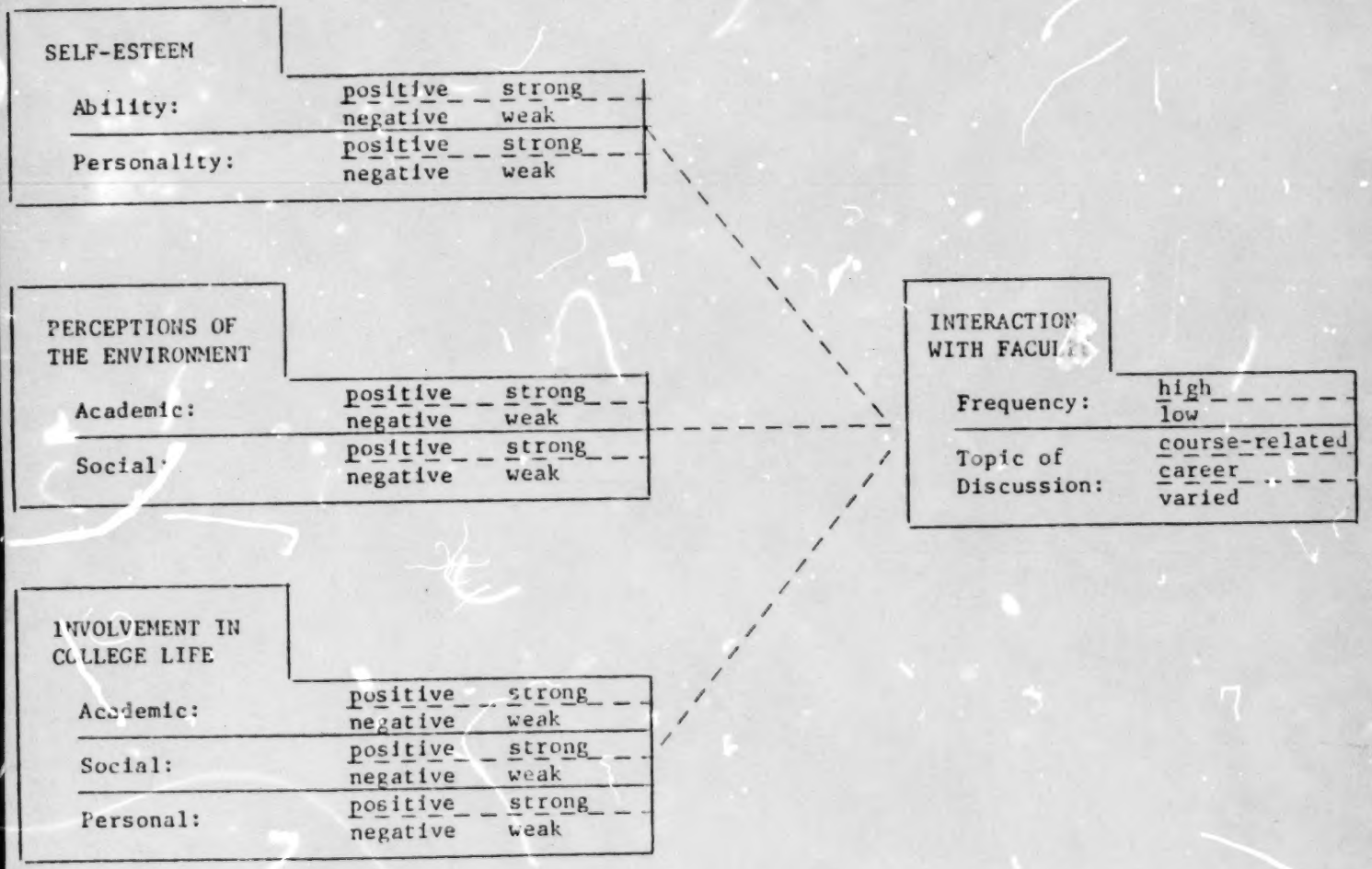

Figure 2
Major Components of a Generalized Theory of Student-Faculty Interaction

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